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Article abstract

Charles Mair portrays the First Nations people as embodying the intersection point between ecology and race. In Tecumseh, Mair contrasts their communal connection with nature with the devastating effects of their political mistreatment. His poem “The Last Bison” is a dual narrative of dispossession, showing how both the First Nations peoples and the buffalo were reduced to servile scarcity. The implied sensitivity of these works seems incommensurable with Mair’s employment as a government agent participating in the Western expansionist movement that was directly responsible for the destruction of First Nations people. The critical examination of this paradox in Mair’s life and work illuminates his efforts to reconcile civilization and wilderness even if he cannot offer any feasible solution. However, it is significant that Mair’s poetry performs a nuanced dialogue that others his subject while simultaneously allowing the other a voice, elevating his work beyond a narrative of dispossession to one of possession.

“Savage nations roam o’er native wilds”: Charles Mair and the Ecological Indian

KATIA GRUBISIC

Like wild creatures generally, the bison was free from deformities.

— Charles Mair, *The American Bison*

IT IS THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY: Louis Riel is hiding in someone’s coal bin, stacks of bison bones line the new Canadian Pacific Railway, and Charles Mair, a government agent, fervent nationalist, and second-rate Confederation Poet and playwright, is struggling to capture in verse Canada’s already multiple solitudes.

As part of the daunting landscape of the New World, the First Nations peoples, to the colonizing Europeans, seemed in Mair’s time analogous to the physical environment. Because most Natives lived relatively nomadic, hunting-gathering lifestyles, and because the First Nations’ lifestyle was so seamlessly embedded in the ecological parameters of the natural world, to the white settlers, both Indians and the land seemed wild, and therefore in need of domestication and conquering. Mair’s play “Tecumseh,” his poem “The Last Bison,” and his essay *The American Bison* reveal both the attempt at appropriation and the need to configure endangered properties to reclaim; for Mair, the problem of writing wilderness in order to claim and tame it was in principle neatly solved by the fusion of the Indian and the natural world, both of which were threatened by the colonial process, and both of which were sufficiently alien to the pioneers to warrant substantial idealization and reification. Mair’s literary representation of the ecological Indian falls into a category later delineated by Donald Hughes:

It was not a wilderness — it was a community in nature of living, among whom the Indians formed a part, but not all. There were also animals, trees, plants, and rivers, and the Indians regarded themselves

as relatives of these, not as their superiors. An Indian took pride not in making a mark on the land, but in leaving as few marks as possible: in walking through the forest without breaking branches, in building a fire that made as little smoke as possible, in killing one deer without disturbing the others. Of course they made changes in their surroundings. All living things do; buffalos make wallows and bees build hives. (4)

While obviously not incorrect, Hughes's easy equation of Natives with nature represents a premodern paradigm that largely fails to take into account ongoing conflicts regarding land treaties, continuous environmental degradation, and negotiations on Native self-government.¹ These political considerations are not obligatory in aesthetic representations of First Nations; however, aligning Natives to buffaloes and bees is not only artistically essentialistic, it also enables myriad racial consequences which were and remain politically loaded. Louis Riel has gone from coal bins to commemorative plaques, and though still listed as threatened, the bison has been making a long, slow comeback, yet it remains unclear in Canada where ecological and racial lines intersect: who has the right to what, and what is to be learned from whom?

Mair's poetry and his biography notably highlight this intersection early on in the development of national, Native, and environmental narratives. His ecologically conservationist ideals, if Romantic, were more or less genuine. Like Hughes, who enthuses that "the unmistakable Indian attitude toward nature is appreciation, varying from calm enjoyment to awestruck wonder" (11), Mair's patronizing admiration of a so-called savage way of life and his commendable observations and recommendations regarding the preservation of wildlife are consistent with his national conception of a wild yet moral, naturally attuned yet civilized Canada. Although he cannot bring himself to condone interracial procreation, his conflicted connections between nature and human nature posit the ecology and the Indian as subjects worthy of appreciation rather than annihilation. Furthermore, although any critical examination of Mair's work tends to begin with an acknowledgement of the relative mediocrity of his verse, his polyphonic consideration of Natives and nature are noteworthy in terms of First Nations and ecocritical history.

The nineteenth-century preoccupation with wilderness was literal and material, as European settlers moved farther west and civilization collided continuously with wilderness, itself a fundamentally white, ur-

ban, colonial conception. Luther Standing Bear, in *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933), explains that “only to the white man was nature a ‘wilderness’. ... When the very animals of the forest began fleeing from his approach, then it was for us the ‘Wild West’” (qtd. in Calloway 1). The process of colonization implemented not only material changes (disrupting the ecological stability that Standing Bear recalls), but shaped ideology and perception as well. Tracing the literary process of representations of Natives and of the eventual indigenous recollection and reclaiming in the United States from the late nineteenth century on, Paula Gunn Allen establishes a significant developmental difference: while the white materialist-determinist construction of identity and otherness is “evolutionary” (*Voice* 6), Native self-determination, particularly as played out in literature, is “an account of how the transitory and the enduring interact” (6). That is, rather than evolving in a linear or diachronic fashion, Native narratives, as generic and thematic juxtapositions as opposed to progressions, highlight evanescence even while they are themselves evanescent. The development of written Canadian identity narratives, as usual, lags somewhat behind that of the Americans: not until the 1970s is there a significant cultural movement among Canadian Natives that emerges as self-defined and self-defining. (Jane Willis, Maria Campbell and Edward Ahenakew, among many others, helped propel the autobiographical movement, which disclosed narratives of dispossession and privileged the influence of orality (McGrath and Petrone (315-17).)

The work of Charles Mair enacts and examines the collision of civilization and wilderness. In his day-to-day work for the Canadian government and in his travels, Mair was faced with the pragmatic concerns of a European-perceived wilderness: the immense expanses of land unbroken by the demarcations of white, urban settlement; the wildlife whose freedom and mobility were both awe-inspiring and an impediment to colonial development; and particularly First Nations peoples, who, to their white guests, seemed to embody a wilderness analogous to that of the landscape and fauna while demonstrating a humanity perplexingly similar to their own. If Mair’s national, civilian project was to domesticate wilderness in infrastructural, zoological, and ethnocultural negotiations, his poetry performs a more nuanced dialogue of taming, one that others while allowing the other a voice, and one whose interpellation of wilderness is a collision but also a recognition, an appreciation (to some degree) and an attempt at reconciliation.

While Mair's non-fiction travel narratives and his conservationist essay on the bison highlight the conflict between civilization and wilderness, his poetry, and the act of poetry itself, often act as the point of intersection between the human and the natural realms; Mair's poetic and dramatic characters tend to be poets or artists whose heightened imagistic sensibilities make them sympathetic to the nuances of the natural world; more commonly even than the figure of the poet, however, Mair's attempts to reconcile and fuse civilization and wilderness converge on the Indian.² Mair aligns First Nations people with ideals of environmental sensitivity, reverence, and conservation and idealizes their relationship to nature. As the site of human-natural harmony, Mair's archetypal Indian is seemingly adjacent to the Noble Savage, a character both revered and vilified as an animalistic, uncivilized creature whose instincts as a hunter and warrior assured him a harmonious existence in precolonial idyllic lands. Mair's quintessential Indian also echoes the iconic Vanishing Indian. The Vanishing Indian, and the consequent Romantic quest to immortalize that image and its supposedly attendant virtues, were, as Thomas King reminds us,

common concern[s] among many intellectuals and artists and social scientists [...] who believed that, while Europeans in the New World were poised on the brink of a new adventure, the Indians were poised on the brink of extinction. (*Truth* 32-33)³

Mair goes further than this widely-accepted stereotype, however, transcending what King dubs "romantic myopia" (37) in several of his short lyrics, in his longer poem "The Last Bison," and in his verse drama *Tecumseh*. Mair renders Indians who are not only noble and strong, but also eloquent and psychologically complex; whose environmental stewardship is presented as an example to the colonizing Europeans; and whose innate connection to the land is viewed, in light of their own ongoing genocide, as prophetic.

From its infancy, Canadian literature has had two versions of the Indian: one, exemplified in the likes of Alexander McLachlan's "The Emigrants" ("All the Mohawks are upon us" (66)) and Duncan Campbell Scott's Native-reifying verse, written from a white perspective, drew on Natives as metaphorical stand-ins for martial or hunting abilities, ecological harmony, primitive grace — the Noble Savage. The other, largely the domain of the half-Mohawk poet E. Pauline Johnson, sought to re-

veal and politicize the suffering of First Nations peoples. This latter version relied on the commercial support and mainstream literary recognition of the white gaze (or, in the case of much twentieth-century opinion of Johnson, the lack of recognition).

Mair's "The Last Bison" immortalizes a metamorphosis and a moment that is more bleakly prognostic than revolutionary, and which does not represent any cultural, racial, or poetic evolution; nor does the poet place his work in such a context. Mair espouses the ephemeral, timeless outlook that Gunn Allen attributes to Native peoples, commenting of his time in the untamed western country that "it recalled . . . the thought of man's evanescence and the apparent fixedness of his institutions" (*Mackenzie* 46). Terry Goldie sees "the poet's propensity to portray both human and non-human life in North America as synchronic, [as] 'natural and so timeless'" (qtd. in Braz 48). Mair found this Romantic transience in wilderness, and thus attempted to protect and preserve nature; he sought to replicate that sublime intersection of human and natural in his poetry.

Tecumseh and many of Mair's Native-themed lyrics reify the ecological Indian; Mair creates characters who exist primarily to express an archetypal, European construction, albeit of such potentially political themes as environmental conservation, First Nations ritual, and cultural extermination and assimilation. In "The Last Bison," however, Mair circumvents this problem of marionettish representation by bisecting the larger-than-life ecological Indian into the natural and the human. He attributes the first to a bison, and chronicles the second in a metanarrative of the unquestionably human, civilized achievements of the First Nations.

Mair lacked the devoted naturalistic interest of Charles G.D. Roberts and, perhaps due to his two occupations of poet and civil servant, sought in nature poetic inspiration and pragmatic, progressive solutions. These apparently paradoxical aims, while they complicate a biographically informed reading of Mair's work, converge into an underlying philosophical fascination with wilderness. Even before the figure of the Indian comes to embody Mair's Romantic view of nature, the poet is concerned with the mystical, preternatural faculties of nature, seeking in sunlight "some prophecy of old" ("August" in *Dreamland* 120), trying to read in nature's "face" "the warning and the mystery" ("Wood-Notes" in *Dreamland* 131), and crouching, at the imminent arrival of a hummingbird, "in watchful eagerness" ("To a Hummingbird" in *Dreamland* 147). By the time Mair's verse play *Tecumseh* is published (in 1886 and then again with new poems in

1901), the poet has absorbed “a lifetime’s observation of those primitive inter-racial and formative influences” (Mair, “Preface” 3). The play, as Mair explains, “attempts to depict dramatically the time and scenes in which the great Indian so *nobly* played his part — at first independently, and in his own country, and afterwards in alliance with General Brock in the War of 1812” (4; emphasis added). The Shawnee leader is unequivocally equated with Brock — “both were men of transcendent ability, to whose genius and self-sacrifice at the most critical period in her history is due the preservation of Canada to the Empire” (5) — and implicitly lauded as one of the defining forces of the nascent nation.

Despite reducing Tecumseh to the role of empirical (in the literal sense) defender, Mair shows a sensitivity and understanding of the First Nations’ political mistreatment, writing of “pale-faced pilgrims” who were initially welcomed, but whose “crimes are great — / Our wrongs unspeakable” (*Tecumseh* 16), and who “from the gift made title to the whole, / And thrust the red man back upon the ribs / Of spiny mountains” (“The Iroquois at the Stake” in *Tecumseh* 160).

Mair takes pains to construct an emblematic figure who is, if not strictly authentic, then at least an expanded, dramatized version of a historical racial situation. The epigraph to *Tecumseh* is taken directly from a speech by the legendary chief:

When the white men first set foot on our shores, they were hungry; they had no places on which to spread their blankets or to kindle their fires. They were feeble; they could do nothing for themselves. Our fathers commiserated their distress, and shared freely with them whatever the Great Spirit had given his red children. (*Tecumseh* 8)

The insinuation is made plain through the five-act drama that then unfolds: the Indians’ kindness was grossly unremunerated. Mair’s contention that Canada was shaped by both Brock and Tecumseh thus balances the nation not only on military valour and personal integrity, but on what Mair admits was, if not ethnocide, then certainly racial injustice.

Mair understands Canadian identity as formed by what he perceived to be the inherent qualities of the British as well as those of the First Nations People. Although he embraced, to an extent, the popular essentialist racial notions of his time, he eschewed the accepted eugenic theories put forth at the end of the nineteenth century by social Darwinists like Sir Francis Galton and Henry Fairfield Osborn. Firm believers in “the inborn

qualities of a race” (Galton qtd. in Pierpont), these scientists called for what was, in hindsight, institutionalized racism, arguing that Caucasians of European, Christian descent were more highly evolved than other ethnic groups. Mair was unusual and progressive in that his representation of First Nations peoples, while assuming a narrow racial universalism, gave these “wild men” (Mair, *Mackenzie* 4) credit for gaining the same footholds of humanity and development as European settlers. “Wild men they were,” he writes, “living as they did in the forest and on their great waters. But it was plain that these people had achieved, without any treaty at all, a stage of civilization distinctly in advance” (4) of other indigenous groups. His quaint surprise at the level of sophistication Natives had achieved despite the lack of white influence does not diminish the commendable democracy of his observation that here was “a body of respectable-looking men, as well-dressed and evidently quite as independent in their feelings as any like number of average pioneers in the East” (4).

In *Through the Mackenzie Basin*, Mair’s account of his government-sponsored, treaty-signing travels to the west, he expresses condescending admiration for a people for whose subjugation and appeasement he was responsible. In *Tecumseh*, Mair gives those people a voice in the powerful, noble military and political Native leader of his title character. Beyond what may be considered simply a playwright’s sense of melodramatic discrimination, Mair elsewhere catalogues, almost anthropologically, the social structures of First Nations peoples, mentioning

The grassy circlets where his village stood,
Well-ruled by custom’s immemorial law.
Along these slopes his happy offspring roved
In days gone by, and dusky mothers plied
Their summer tasks, or loitered in the shade.
Here the magician howled his demons up,
And here the lodge of council had its seat,
Once resonant, with oratory wild. (“Last” 149)

Ultimately, Mair’s Indian is more than an idealized hunter living in harmonious unity with “the summer sun,” the “virgin air,” and “waters undefiled” (149); this Noble Savage also has law, lineage, domestic order and chores, leisure, a system of mythology or religion, politics, and even oratory. Natives, in other words, are able to be both human and wild, as civilized as a “number of average pioneers in the East” (*Mackenzie* 4), and

simultaneously exhibiting a sublime, Romantic innate link to the natural world.

Non-Natives are not completely impervious to the transformative, transpersonal wilderness that imbues Mair's Native characters with their harmonious, ecologically balanced existence; indeed poets, even those of white, Anglo-Saxon descent, seem particularly susceptible to the pacifism, loftiness, and instinctive equilibrium that characterizes Tecumseh and the Natives to whom the bison refers. While the human speaker of "The Last Bison" is not explicitly an artist, his languid observation and heightened awareness of the "Bright solitudes, with power / To charm the spirit" (149) and "Sorrow, too" (149) are typical of the contemplative stance of Victorian poets and expressive of Mair's own initial attitude about the conflicting environmental stimuli necessary for writing. ("Lord! What a lovely day and I not in the woods," he wrote to Henry J. Morgan in 1866. "Odd creeks and pools! ... Think of the rustling leaves; think of the owls hooting at midnight and the lynx's frantic scream" (qtd. in Shrive, 19).) Mair's contemporaries apparently judged him to be just such an ecologically sensitive poet-artist himself. An unattributed review of *Dreamland and Other Poems* calls Mair's "the genuine poetry of nature, which when written, is part of nature's self, plus artistic expression, and like her [nature] is imperishable" (qtd. in Shrive, 21).

The character of Lefroy in *Tecumseh* is the most obvious example in Mair's poetry of the poet, like the Indian, as a site where the human and the natural meet. Described as "a poet-artist, enamoured of Indian life, and in love with Iena [the Indian maiden]" (*Tecumseh* 10), Lefroy, who, as it turns out in the play, was a boyhood friend of Brock's, wins Iena's heart and then convinces Tecumseh to overlook concerns of racial purity and sanction his courtship. Tecumseh capitulates rather easily — "women's tears unman me" (27) — but eventually accepts Lefroy. Lefroy anticipates Mair's conflation, in "The Last Bison," of a prelapsarian, precolonial Native freedom with a thriving, virgin state of nature:

And in the congeal'd north where silence self
 Ached with intensity of stubborn frost,
 There lived a soul more wild than barbarous;
 A tameless soul — the sunburnt savage free —
 Free, and untainted by the greed of gain:
 Great Nature's man content with Nature's food. (22)

Among his beloved Indians, Lefroy is “part of Nature’s self” (20), and indeed transcends his European identity and its therefore anti-ecological associations to become “ocean’s paraphrase” (21). Lefroy also waxes similarly poetic during a quiet moment with Brock, and imparts to the general the environmental veneration, which is central to the beliefs of the Shawnees with whom Lefroy has chosen to live, and which British Canada would do well to emulate. Lefroy describes “the interminable wildernesses” (91) of “the measureless West” (91), which is

Flushed with fresh blooms, deep perfumed by the rose,
And murmurous with flower-fed bird and bee.
The deep-grooved bison-paths like furrows lay,
Turned by the cloven hoofs of the thundering herds
Primeval, and still travelled as of yore. (92)

Already in *Tecumseh*, the buffalo herds are symbolic of an intact, sublime plenitude and, significantly, are associated with the similarly plentiful First Nations. Just as the “countless myriads [of bison] stretched for many a league” (93), Native

chieftains of strange speech and port of war,
... battle-armed, in weather-brawny bulk,
Roamed fierce and free in huge and wild content. (93)

As the *porte-parole* between the Natives and the British Canadians, the white poet (such as Lefroy in *Tecumseh* and the speaker in “The Last Bison”) is a “captive, but free to come and go” (*Tecumseh* 16); he has the Janus-like capacity at once to bear the benefits of a Eurocentric education and therefore describe his natural surroundings (of which the Indian, for Mair, is inexorably a part) with suitably epic grandeur, and to comprehend and communicate the advantages of the more ecologically sustainable First Nation’s viewpoint.

Although the poet figure can straddle both the civilized white world and the realm of nature, however, this hybridity cannot extend beyond the verbal or mimetic. Lefroy, although he is “enamoured of Indian life” (10) and surely loves Iena, and although he fights alongside Tecumseh at Niagara, can never join their race. Iena, fearing for her lover’s life, disguises herself as a man and ultimately saves Lefroy’s life, taking an American bullet meant for him. Underlying the obvious Victorian melodrama, the significance of those left standing at the end of the fifth act betrays Mair’s proviso of racial continuity: although a white man can engage in

a neo-Petrarchan courtship of a Native girl, their union cannot be procreative; moreover, although the Native woman dies, thus abruptly interrupting her racial propagation, the poet, and consequently the poetry that appropriates the Indian, albeit with the best of intentions, survives, and goes on to define the nation and the national literature.

Despite writing in the cultural and literary context of harsh land-settlement challenges, of rapid and rampant industrialization and urbanization, and of a nascent, distinctly Canadian but still Loyalist national identity, Mair envisions utopia not as rural and communal (as does, for example, Isabella Valancy Crawford), nor as the poetically worthy and divinely inflected sublime confrontation of the human and the wild (as do Charles Sangster and Wilfred Campbell), nor as uttering an explicitly British-Canadian patriotism (as does E. Pauline Johnson, in her less political verse). Mair's "The Last Bison" in particular enacts a poetics that is simultaneously poetically unself-conscious and lucidly observant, that lacks a defined — mechanized or narrative — human presence, and that is devoid of jingoistic nationalism.

"The Last Bison" is as much an account of an archetypal last Indian as it is the swan song of the buffalo. Both First Nations peoples and buffalo, in Mair's view, had gone from regal abundance to servile scarcity: with the Indians "had fled / The bison-breed which overflowed the plains" (149), and Mair is determined to represent their dual narrative of dispossession. Mair's poetic and ethnocultural accounts of the First Nations people are consistently linked to his preoccupation with *Bison Americanus*, "the herds," he notes, "possessed a distinctive character, and seemed to have their roughly defined boundaries, like the Indians themselves" (*American* 95). Native and Metis guides served as the source of Mair's information and enthusiasm regarding the bison, which seeped into his poetry and informed his figurative considerations of wilderness:

During my long residence in the North-West I have had the opportunity of consulting many Indians and half-breeds of experience and of great repute in their day as plain hunters, and thus of pursuing inquiries into questions of interest, with regard to the bison on the safe ground of their daily contact with and intimate knowledge of its habits. (95)

While Mair's interest in the bison was primarily zoological — his essay contains long descriptions and comparisons of various North American and global species and subspecies of the animal — his poetic explorations

of the endangered buffalo and of the purportedly analogous endangered Indian reveal a fascination with the construct of wilderness.

In “The Last Bison,” a human speaker chronicles the silence of the intact landscape and the bittersweet charm of his own solitude, eulogizing the presumably extinct First Nations before turning to the poem’s central orator: an immense, legendary, singing burdash.⁴ After a brief hint, in the first stanza, of the elegiac thrust of the poem, the human speaker allows himself to be tempted by his awe-inspiring surroundings; he watches “the sun’s fierce beams / Reverberate in wreathed ethereal flame” (148) and invokes an “undeflowered,” “inviolat[e]” (149) prairie whose capital-L “Loneliness” (149) suggests a prototypically sublime aesthetic, with “power / To charm the spirit” (149). The speaker’s environment is almost entirely organic; among the flowers, “lakelet[s]” (148), and “cerulean skies” (148), the only hint of the civilized, industrialized Canada that Mair knew — “all the weary clangour of the world” (149) — is alleviated by the “homeless and unfurrowed prairie.” Far from evoking an unpleasant *dépaysement*, the homelessness and wildness of the landscape is restorative, easing clangour into languor.

The poem swings from the languorous, forgetful pastoral utopia of the poet-speaker’s initial rest-stop to the vibrant and material dystopic description of the extinction of the bison and their analogues, the Natives, and finally to an apocalyptic resolution — a final, foreseen utopia that spares no “peopled cities” (152) nor “pomp and pride” (152). The first, pastoral section of “The Last Bison” is idyllic but intentionally insipid: for all its Latinate ornament, the vale does not harbour more than a diminutive “lakelet” (148), the “tiny wings” (148) achieve a “simulated flight” (148), and the Saskatchewan river produces only a “turbid moan” (148).

The second section, cataloguing the triumphs of First Nations civilization and the sorrow of their ethnocide, resonates with tangible, quotidian images. Natives are introduced as ecological stewards, having “for ages held, / In fealty to nature, these domains” (149). The muscular poetry is itself, like the actual remnants the speaker observes, a relic of the Indian race. In the second, Indian-themed section, Mair’s diction, unlike the preceding airy “aspens” (148), “snowy cloud-lands” (148), and “wreathed ethereal flame” (148), rings with thick palatal and labial sounds — the “dusky mothers plied / Their summer tasks” (149) — and sibilants that insinuate a memorial to the “grassy circlets” (149) of demolished Indian villages.

The third section returns to elevated language, but employs epic tropes to convey the tremendous symbolic dimension of the burdash. The speaker-poet raises rhetorical questions (“Was this a living form, / Or but an image by the fancy drawn?” (150)), inserts apostrophic intrusions (“But no — he breathed!” (150)), and liberally applies superlatives until the poetic tension boils over and “endow[s] the noble beast with song” (151).

The bison’s song is particularly significant considering the scientific context regarding Natives’ linguistic abilities. A century ago, the popular and academic anthropological assumption was that “Native Americans lacked real languages and were only questionably human [, and] people still questioned the existence of literary traditions (or, quite frankly, any real culture) among the Native peoples of North America” (Bruchac xvii). By giving his Indian-affiliated bison the power of speech, Mair recognizes what is obvious to us: wild though they may have seemed to white settlers, Natives were linguistically skilled. In the counterpoint example of Scott’s poetry, Indians are portrayed as governed by “abject unreasoning passion” in “At Gull Lake: August 1810” and, when they are accorded the command of language, merely use it to align themselves with a Romantic bucolic sensibility; Scott’s Keejigo sings, “I am here my beloved / Heart’s-blood on the feathers / The foot caught in the trap” (172). Mair’s eloquent buffalo, meanwhile, performs feats of historical deduction, anthropological analysis, and sophisticated versification, recalling a human-natural relationship ruled by “hunger, not . . . greed” (“Last” 151) — which idyll lasted “Until the red man mixed his blood / With paler currents” (151) — and using chiasmus to more effectively evoke how “waned the myriads which had waxed before” (152). Furthermore, while the buffalo’s “Song” may seem a poetic conceit, and while there is a suggestion that the animal’s presence and address may be no more than the speaker’s own “teeming fancy” (150), the act not only of speech but of song belies the anthropological snobbery of which Bruchac writes. Mair also invokes, perhaps inadvertently, the Natives’ own metaphor. The bison’s song echoes the words of the Crow chief Plenty Coups — “when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened. There was little singing anymore” (qtd. in Calloway 123).

Putting aside the inherently proprietary (and here, anachronistically post-structuralist) act of linguistic evocation, the speaker-poet is fairly erased as an owning, civilizing ‘I’. There are vestiges of the Romantic con-

vention of the poet as an Aeolian harp — “o’er my spirit swept the sense of change” (149), the speaker intones — but “The Last Bison” noticeably lacks the Wordsworthian Romanticism of which Roy Daniells accuses, or praises, Mair (see 4). Rather, the speaker’s function is structural rather than meditative: the human narrator serves to set up the cultural and zoological contexts for the poet to channel the voice of the last bison.

The endangered buffalo’s association, in “The Last Bison,” with the archetype of the Vanishing Indian is economically logical: “As the bison has practically passed away, so the economic uses to which it was put by the Natives and early immigrants in the North-West have passed away with it” (Mair, *American* 103). In his essay on the bison, Mair draws attention to the ritual buffalo dances of the Plains Indians, making much of the “remarkable fidelity” (97) of the mimicry involved; he also reverses the comparison and anthropomorphizes the bison, recounting the emotional bonds that formed between members of the same herd, so that bulls apparently remained by the side of fallen cows “not through accident, but evidently from feeling” (98). These incidents are not especially anthropologically or zoologically accurate or insightful, but they are revealing of Mair’s desire to empirically align Natives and buffalo, seeking in them wilderness and humanity respectively and effecting a kind of trans-species cross-pollination that allows him to discover and discuss the complex, interconnected, and interdependent ecological strata of wilderness.

Mair’s non-fiction is concerned with the analysis of literal ecology, and his representations of poet-characters dissect the figurative, epistemological web of wilderness. Although the white speaker of the bison’s metanarrative is not explicitly a poet, as Lefroy is, it may be deduced that his contemplative, metaphorically rich position, along with the precedent for ethnic hybridity that Mair sets up in *Tecumseh*’s Lefroy, places him as an analogue of the poet. Assuming the speaker as the speaker-poet, the transference of *parole* to the bison, and the structural emphasis on this transmission — the poem moves from the speaker’s florid, impotent imagery, to an unadorned tribute to Native civilization, and finally crescendoes in the burdash’s own voice — effaces the white poet-speaker, blurring the delineation which, in *Tecumseh*, prevents a true symbiosis between wild and civilized, between Indian and European. As Albert Braz points out, the song of the bison can and often does function independently of the rest of the poem (53); the white speaker’s introduction serves to confer the legitimacy of relative

realism and to construct “the famed Burdash” (150) as objectively mighty, mythological, and metonymic.

Braz, on the critical heels of Leslie Monkman, suggests that the death-song of “The Last Bison” is equivalent, as the evocation of a First Nations ritual, to that in Mair’s “The Iroquois at the Stake” (48); in keeping with Mair’s preoccupation with wilderness, however, there is more at stake in the former poem than in the latter. “The Last Bison” references what Monkman identifies as Native rite and, like “The Iroquois at the Stake,” chronicles the ethnocide of the Indians, but it also foregrounds the ecological Indian in a way closer to the Native mode of transitory transformation than to a white, rhetorical evolution.

When the white poet-speaker of “The Last Bison” first invokes the Indian, it is to recall his “supple, clean-limbed pony of the plains” (148) — not just a horse, but specifically “a runner of pure Indian blood” (148) in whose eyes “still gleamed the desert’s fire” (148). The horse’s lineage is faultless: not only does he “besp[eak] the Barb” (148), an equine breed imported from Barbary and known for speed and stamina, but he is even “from the ‘Centaur’s’ drawn” (148), deriving from the far reaches of Greek mythology and from legends of the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs. According to the cultural lore of the latter, upon seeing the Europeans on horseback, the Natives were frightened and thought they were seeing divine beings: half-man, half-beast. Mair thus calls to mind the broader history of European invasion and subjugation, placing the prairie landscape and the Canadian mistreatment of First Nations people in a mythological context. (The buffalo, a near obsession for Mair, also appears in Cortez’s travelogues: “we are told,” Mair writes, that the buffalo “was pointed out to Cortez, in the menagerie of Montezuma as a rare animal from the north” (*American* 93).) Despite calling to mind the racial consequences of colonization through his allusions to the Aztecs, Mair legitimizes the pony’s abilities through Eurocentric relationships to Barbary horses and Greek demigods, thus enacting the recurring problem of many of his contemporaries, whose attempt at a Canadian poetics was written from the cultural vocabulary of Europe. While adhering to a European, colonial paradigm, Mair’s reference recognizes the global extent of the oppression of indigenous peoples, and in that paradoxical, troubled acknowledgement lies the poem’s polyphonic, if unresolved, representation of the Indian.

Mair often simultaneously evokes North American Native and clas-

sical human/nature hybridity. Like the Indian horse, which is symbolic of the junction between the human and the natural, the Native peoples themselves are parallel to the natural world. The speaker of “The Last Bison” recalls the race of warriors “Whose faded nation had for ages held, / In fealty to Nature, these domains” (149), and immediately notes that “With them had fled / The bison-breed which overflowed the plain” (149). The dying burdash similarly links animals to Natives, prophesying a time after the demise of white civilization when

The earth smiles as of yore, the skies are bright,
Wild cattle graze and bellow on the plain,
And savage nations roam o’er native wilds again! (152)

The eventual restoration of what Mair conceives as the natural order, and the necessary removal of European “peopled cities” (152), especially as sung by an almost mythological creature, reaches to an oneiric past and to an implausible future, placing the symbolic buffalo, its associated Native population, and ecological integrity in an imaginary state of poetic suspension.

That suspension is typical of nature poetry in general; referring to the work of poets-cum-naturalists Ernest Thompson Seton and Charles G. D. Roberts, W.H. New underlines the anthropomorphic tendencies of naming animals to domesticate them linguistically and ideologically: “While they are not turned into pets, the wild animals are in this way rhetorically tamed, made accessible” (“Tale-Tellers” 111). Seeking psychological truth in nature and animals, “Roberts argued that it was not instinct alone that dictated animal behaviour but something akin to reason” (111). Like his attribution of human characteristics to buffalo, and buffalo traits to humans in *The American Bison*, Mair in “The Last Bison” merges animal instinct and human reason in the burdash.

Seeking behavioural parallels, presages, or entire belief systems in the animal kingdom is not ethnically or culturally exclusive; the Kiowa storyteller Old Lady Horse, in relating the extinction of the bison, anthropomorphizes the animals into self-awareness — “The buffalo saw that their day was over” (qtd. in Calloway 129). First Nations peoples have long based their spiritual and ritual structures on wildlife, and the notion that there is something more organic, innate, or authentic in the Ojibway coyote trickster than, for instance, in Roberts’s hermit-thrush is essentialist and exclusive. In Roberts’s poem, however, the thrush is more meta-

phorical than corporeal, standing in as it does for poetic-philosophical abstractions, while Native wilderness-based belief systems tend to incorporate that wilderness into their own ontological ecology, a comprehensive web of subsistence, mythology, and oral history. As the Native American scholar Colin G. Calloway puts it, "Buffalo became the economic foundation of Plains Indian life, figured prominently in religious ceremonies, and were ingrained in the culture. The buffalo herds were the source of Plains Indians' independence and prosperity" (121).

Legally as well as mythologically, the fate of First Nations peoples was tied to that of the buffalo. In several American treaties, the government "guaranteed to the Indians the right to continue hunting on certain lands 'so long as the buffalo may range thereon in such numbers as to justify the chase'" (Calloway 121). The Arapaho artist Carl Sweezy, who lived at the turn of the century, explains that "we believed ... the Indians and the buffalo would hold out together as long as grass grew" (qtd. in Galloway 127). Mair's metonymic use of bison and Indian, it seems, is not so far removed from the identity narratives of Natives themselves.

Although his portrayal of Native peoples generously and commendably extends their popular representation at the time, Mair's ecological Indian is nevertheless an inaccurate, fictitious creation who "of course lived upon [the bison] but, with savage conservatism, severely punished anyone who wantonly butchered them" (*American* 95). Shepard Krech partially dispels the myth of Native peoples as economical and efficient *vis-à-vis* their bison kills, pointing out that some tribes ran hundreds of buffalo over cliffs, butchered most of the top layers of carcasses, and then selected only cow hides or certain delicacies from other animals, often leaving dozens to rot along the bottom of the gullies or arroyos (133). Nor were the First Nations immune to the greed of which Mair accuses the Europeans: as the prairie tribes became equestrian and were thus able to cull more bison (raiding and warfare also increased as a result), their tent sizes increased from six to up to twenty hides (136). Mair does allude to the wasteful Native practice of buffalo pounds in an endnote, but forgives the practice on the grounds of "a deeply rooted superstition" (*American* 108). Krech also mentions the belief that any buffalo left alive would warn its fellows and jinx the hunt, but Mair romanticizes the justification to the point of ecological irrelevance, adding that "pound-making, too, was intended to supply the helpless and needy in a great camp with the necessities of life" (108). Mair suggests that "as the Indians hunted them the

race [of bison] would probably have lasted for ever” (100). In any case, the wholesale slaughter that Mair witnessed on the prairies left a sufficiently vivid impression to bias his opinion: “At the close . . . of one winter a man could go along the banks of Frenchman River for fifty miles by simply jumping from one carcass to another” (Carver qtd. in Mair, *American* 101).

The nearly catastrophic decline of the buffalo was also compounded by natural causes — wolf predation, fires, diseases, and especially droughts, which occurred during the heaviest human harvesting. Nonetheless, as Krech points out, by the time the final hides were shipped to Europe in 1884, the First Nations had been hunting buffalo for eight millennia (144), which suggests that their near-extinction in one century was primarily the result of white North American and European market demands. Red Cloud, the nineteenth-century Sioux chief, declared that “where the Indian killed one buffalo, the [white] hide and tongue hunters killed fifty” (qtd. in Krech 142). As Mair’s last buffalo so articulately puts it, the frenzied violence and unwarranted destruction of the species was primarily the fault of

Pale enemies, who slew with equal mirth
The harmless or the hurtful things of earth,
In dead fruition of their mad desire:
The ministers of mischief and of might,
Who yearn for havoc as the world’s supreme delight. (“Last” 152)

Nature is a place of transformation for the First Nations, who, while they tend to live in harmonious symbiosis with their environment, as Krech elucidates, are susceptible to the hubris and greed of their white adversaries. The white “ministers of mischief” (152) whose carnage the buffalo condemn are denied rehabilitation, doomed instead to the extinction to which they allegedly brought the bison and the First Nations — “they who spared not are no longer spared” (152).

While Mair’s representation of First Nations and Europeans may seem clearly polarized between the “nations primitive” (151) who “wasted not” (151) and those who “spared not” (152), a grey area emerges in the case of the Metis peoples. Mair uses the accepted terminology of the time to describe the Metis — mixed-breed, half-breed, mixed-blood — and cannot be faulted for doing so; his poetic treatment of miscegenation,⁵ however, is a noteworthy addendum to his otherwise blissful depiction of the ecological Indian and his great friend, the sensitive white poet. In

Tecumseh, Iena and Lefroy's love is barren, and "The Last Bison" is a hermaphrodite burdash. Despite his "enormous bulk whose presence filled / The very vale with awe" ("Last" 150), this last member of the buffalo herds, analogous in Mair's work to First Nation tribes, leaves nothing behind but a prophecy. In his testimony of genocide, the bison identifies the cause not strictly as white immigration, but as racial mingling:

Ours were the virgin prairies, and their rapture ours!

...

Until the red man mixed his blood
With paler currents. (151)

For Mair's Indians as well as for the opinionated bison, racial purity is paramount, and his Native protagonists frequently bemoan what Mair sees as racial treason: an Iroquois waiting to die vociferates against those Natives who were "won ... to their side" ("The Iroquois at the Stake" in *Tecumseh* 163), calling them "traitors to our race" (163).

Reiterating the damaging influx of the pale currents invoked by the bison, *Tecumseh*, foreseeing defeat by Harrison at Niagara, blames himself for the "pale doubt" (*Tecumseh* 120) that has distracted him. For Mair, the idealized — noble, ecological, eloquent and courageous — Indian lives in a world "changeless and unchanged" ("Last" 151) — that is, suspended between progress and perfection — and Mair cannot reconcile to that suspension a progeny of ambiguous racial lineage and thus, by extension, uncertain ideological and political allegiances.⁶

The Indian and, to a lesser extent, the poet represent the perfect interstice of the human and the natural, revealing the components of Mair's nationalistic vision: rooted in the past, in ethical natural husbandry, and in pacifism, Mair's Canada is irrevocably British and yet self-consciously strives to assert its autonomy. Describing the new Dominion as the "imperial offspring overseas" (Preface 6) of glorious Britain, Mair is nonetheless subtly subversive, even didactic:

It seems strange that well-read Englishmen should be ignorant of this vital record (details of the War of 1812), whose stirring chapters exhibit in the clearest light the spirit and the springs of action which have made Canada what she is. (6)

That question of identity, still contentious in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, while it tinted Mair's poetics, was at the centre of his political life in a much more concerted way, and focuses some puzzling dis-

continuities between the grandiose ecological Indians of his poetry and his quotidian existence and political involvement. In 1868, after publishing *Dreamland and Other Poems*, Mair helped found the Canada First party, which aimed to bring about a more unified Canada, and subsequently moved to Red River as the paymaster for the Fort Garry road being built there. Mair went to Red River in part to help ease the land transfer of that region from the Hudson's Bay Company to the Dominion of Canada and to act as chronicler and correspondent. The letters that he sent back to Upper Canada, some of which he evidently did not intend to publish (or at least not verbatim), appeared in the Toronto *Globe*, to the amusement of Ontario Protestants but the consternation of the settlers, First Nations, and Metis people (the latter of whom accounted for fully one-third of the population at Red River (see Shrive 59)) of what is now Manitoba. Mair was also involved in the apparently illegal purchase of Indian land to which the occupants had claims, but his letters, which were meant to attract new settlers from Upper Canada, and which depicted the Red River settlers as "anthropological oddities quite removed by customs as well as by miles from the norms of eastern society" (Shrive 67), caused the greatest deal of resentment among his new neighbours, who felt betrayed by the excessively delightful renderings of the west, by the exaggerated details of financial transactions, and by the caricatures and gossip of the various ethnic and social groups. As a result, Mair was publicly whipped by one of the Metis women, jailed (he narrowly escaped a death sentence), and, famously, derided in the newspapers by Louis Riel himself.

While the "cultural chauvinism" (Braz 42) of the young, zealously expansionistic Mair during the first Riel uprising might be forgiven, his comportment during the second, especially after the expression of the peaceful and racially tolerant poetic sentiment of *Tecumseh*, remains baffling. Considering his criticism of European greed, environmental disregard, and racial contempt, particularly in "The Last Bison," Mair's contribution to the suppression of the second uprising is surprising. Mair in fact interrupted the writing of *Tecumseh*, his great Indian epic, to join Colonel George Denison's military regiment, which helped quell the 1885 uprising. The first edition of *Tecumseh* was published a month after Riel was hanged.

The relationship of Mair the poet to Mair the Metis prosecutor is complex. Braz maintains that "while Mair may consider the First Nations

great conservationists in comparison to the white people, he still views them as destructive to the bison" (49); "The Last Bison," however, designates the symbiosis of Indian and buffalo as near-perfect ecological equilibrium; the burdash recalls "nations primitive" (151), who

loved us, and they wasted not. They slew,
 With pious hand, but for their daily need;
 Not wantonly, but as the due
 Of stern necessity which Life doth breed.
 Yea, even as earth gave us herbage meet,
 So yielded we, in turn, our substance sweet
 To quit the claims of hunger, not of greed. (151)

The existence of a larger-than-life conservationist Native furthermore presupposes the existence also of its opposite:

Habitually coupled with its opposite, the Nonecological White Man, the Ecological Indian proclaims both that the American Indian is a non-polluting ecologist, conservationist and environmentalist, and that the white man is not. (Krech 22)

The theories of conservatism collide with Mair's pragmatic concerns; in his daily business, Mair enacted the part of the "pale destroyer" ("Last" 151), while his poetics continued to proclaim the Native, and therefore ecological, cause. Mair's 1899 expeditions west, to sign treaties with the several groups of First Nations peoples living in the prairies, had as its express goal the facilitation of immigration. Particularly discouraging to European settlement was the lack of infrastructure. Mair blames resource extraction, the railway, and the Northern Pacific line extension for the death-knell of the bison (*American* 100), but he was at least ideologically responsible for that development, promoting as he did the settlement of the west.

9-Regarding Mair's own expressions of Native / white, conservationist / settler hybridity, Braz proposes that Mair's ambiguity is self-referential, that his Eurocentrism is concurrently undermined by his environmental and ethnocultural sensibilities: "at the same time that Mair avidly promotes the settlement of the North-West by Euro-Canadians, particularly those of Anglo-Celtic ancestry, he calls into question the wisdom, and long-term success, of any such enterprise" (49). Mair's questioning, however, happens independently of his colonial enterprise; only in his poetic works does he tend toward the elegiac tone that mourns rather than objectifies the loss of wilderness.

Part of Mair's task in the Prairies, as the English Secretary of the Half-Breed Commission, was to pave the way for settlement by implementing infrastructure and encouraging resource extraction (Mair, *Mackenzie* 24). While Mair the conservationist was condemning the railroad for the extinction of the buffalo, and while Mair the poet was bewailing the imminent demise of the First Nations, Mair the western expansionist was happily encouraging the Natives onto reserves and buying off Metis rights for 160 acres per person. In the account of his treaty travels, he almost seems to relish the heightened affective state of the end of the Indian era, waxing melodramatic about

the spirit of change ... brooding even here. The moose, the beaver and the bear had for years been decreasing, and other fur-bearing animals were slowly but surely lessening with them. The natives, aware or this, were now alive, as well, to concurrent changes foreign to their experience. (23-24)

While lamenting in one breath the seemingly inevitable demise of the First Nations peoples, Mair strives also to reconstruct and to museumify, if you will, the Indian. His essay on the American bison, which discusses the animal largely in its relationship to Natives, mentions, with the glee of anthropological discovery, "the Mandans, a singular race which was almost exterminated by small-pox some fifty years ago" (99). In his essay on the extirpated buffalo, Mair's reconstruction of Indian wilderness includes a happy return to abundance, which is reminiscent of his call in "The Last Bison" for a time when "naught but the vacant wilderness is seen" (152):

I verily believe that if to-day such a miracle could happen as the sudden appearance of an immense bison herd between the two Saskatchewan the reaper would be left in the swath, and the ripened grain would cry in vain for harvesters. (*American* 106)

The condition of living on the cusp of that conflict between abundant wilderness and the desire — and the necessity — of reaping was an experience nearing the fantastic. To travel in 1899 to the Peace River area of what is now Alberta, Mair wrote, was "to enter into an unfamiliar state of things; a region in which a primitive people, not without faults or depravities, lived on Nature's food, and thrive on her unfailing harvest of fur" (*Mackenzie* 6). Mair describes a "golden age" (6); in this Edenic society, in which "no one stole [and] no one lied" (6), lived

a very simple folk indeed, in whose language profanity was unknown, and who had no desire to leave their congenial solitudes for any other spot on earth: solitudes which so charmed the educated minds who brought the white man's religion, or traffic, to their doors, that, like the Lotus-eaters, they, too, felt little craving to depart. (6)

Mair's emotional and ideological investment in the myth of the ecological Indian seems to derive from a raceless wish for prelapsarian perfection; this prelapsarian wilderness, when harnessed by British civilization, promised the ideal balance between nature and morality. Mair's attempt at ideological conflation unsettles what New views as the binaries of the colonial process: New's "garden vs wilderness" (*Land Sliding* 22) becomes, in Mair's vision and by his pen, a cultivated wilderness, his "orderly vs chaotic" (22) becomes regulated chaos, and his "moral vs savage" (22) becomes a moral savage.

The word savage is derived from the Old French *salvage*, from the Italian *selvaggio*, and from the Latin *silvaticus*, meaning woodland, wood, wooded or forest. The word's etymological lineage suggests that its pejorative use by Europeans to denote aboriginal peoples was more culturally than linguistically inflected, and Mair, in depicting First Nations people as sylvan beings who were nonetheless fundamentally human, and thus endowed with the same verbal, rational, and ethical capacities as Europeans, restores the duplicitous appellation of the Noble Savage. His depiction of the figure of the ecological Indian gives a political dimension to what is poetically monovocal pastoralism, and ethnoculturally a reductive essentialist portrayal of the ecological Indian.

The Native Americanist Joni Adamson recalls teaching classes to American Indian students who confronted her analysis of environmentally romantic abstractions — for the ecological Indian is necessarily abstract — with statistics, and with accountability that defied clear ethocultural boundaries:

In a discussion of Leslie Maron Silko's *Ceremony*, I might begin by drawing students' attention to Tayo's mystical connection to nature and his journey to wholeness, but my students would redirect our focus to the ways in which American Indians have been stereotyped for far too long by environmentalists and by others as the people with an ancient wisdom that alone can save the planet. . . . Every time I wanted to discuss the abstract, aesthetically beautiful concept of "the earth in balance," they wanted to discuss the ways in which Tayo's mother rep-

resents the high rates of teenage pregnancy, the high rates of suicide, the high rates of alcohol abuse [in racially marginalized communities]. (xiv-xv)

Considering beauty and harmony alongside power imbalances, Adamson contends, leads to politically and discursively fertile “‘middle place’ — that contested terrain where interrelated social and environmental problems interrelate — to work for transformative change” (xvii).

Mair’s writing and governmental work traces the ideological ancestry of the paradox that Adamson identifies in contemporary Native identity discourse: Mair’s literary endeavours, notably *Tecumseh* and “The Last Bison,” reify and romanticize an ecological Indian who is wilderness personified, and who represents both the untamable and the possibility of infinite taming, of infinite colonial ownership. Mair’s governmental work, meanwhile, was part of the process of the Canada’s early institutionalization of environmental racism. Although it does little more than prefigure the echo of that contradiction in subsequent Native literature and criticism, proposing no solutions, the critical examination of this paradox in Mair’s life and work brings his work into Adamson’s “middle place.”

The ethical lessons Mair drew from the First Nations’ environmentally harmonious lifestyle were unself-consciously harnessed in the verse of a white poet, and the logistical, interracial integration of that desired ecological sustainability is ultimately left unresolved. Perhaps there is no solution: Paula Gunn Allen writes, in the late twentieth century, that “the setting required by Native civilizations differs greatly from that required by industrial and [Western] post-industrial cultures” (*Song* 4); the words of this renowned Native scholar reveal a nominal ideological shift from biological determinism to an ethnocultural paradigm, presupposing the existence of a hermetic, universal Native civilization. Even in the twenty-first century, the political and fiscal mechanics of the implementation of Native sovereignty remain fraught and murky, even within ethnic groups. Separate but equal status increasingly seems an impossibility, as parity itself is still defined as a Western, Eurocentric, capitalist procedural equality, and separation thus becomes geographically and chronologically unachievable, and politically and qualitatively undesirable. Mair’s suggestion in “The Last Bison” of a return to an environmental *tabula rasa*, is no more than a “teeming fancy” (150), but the poem implies that poetry itself is a liminal space in which that fancy is feasible. While in *Tecumseh*, the poet embodies the attempt to reconcile civilization and wilderness

without properly recognizing the latter, in “The Last Bison,” poetry enacts that fusion. The bison, like the Indian and the wilderness that were “so intimately associated with [Canada’s] history” (*American* 107) and with the European construction of that history, is going down singing. In practical terms, the poem puts forward no feasible solution other than obliteration, but the fantastical dimension echoes that of a Native trickster figure, elevating it beyond a narrative of dispossession to one of possession.

NOTES

¹ Hughes, to his credit, offered detailed anthropological observations of various quotidian Native practices. He also meticulously distinguished between various Native groups, eschewing at least some pan-Native generalizations.

² Although the word Indian is still accepted to indicate North American aboriginal peoples, and although the more recent names of First Nations person and Native were not in use in Mair’s time, I will use the three interchangeably in this contemporary discourse of a nineteenth-century work, with neither derogatory nor corrective intent.

³ Tecumseh is also the name of the protagonist in one of King’s own works, the novel *Truth and Bright Water*. King’s Tecumseh is a feckless adolescent whose cynicism regarding relationships, standard transmissions and his Native identity complicate and interrogate the quasi-mythological historical figure that Mair eulogizes.

⁴ A burdash was a hermaphrodite bison so rare as to be legendary, whose especially glossy robe was far more valuable than that of other bison.

⁵ The word miscegenation, though coined in 1863, was not in current use by Mair and his contemporaries. The inter-racial ‘problem’, however, was cause for much concern; Mair’s correspondence to *The Globe* during his years at Red River reveals his opinion of the “half-breed” men and women who “will do anything but farm” and who, “having no coat of arms but a ‘totem’ to look back to, make up for the deficiency by biting at the backs of their ‘white’ sisters” and brothers (qtd. in Shrive 70-71).

⁶ In his essay on *The American Bison*, Mair’s scientifically oblivious discussion of albino animals is an extension of his fixation on purity: unaware (understandably, at the time) of the genetic mutation involved in albinism, Mair contends that white animals “illustrate a tendency in nature to revert to type” (96). In other words, if “the colour of the primitive white cattle of Europe is white” (96), then purity of lineage is the native, desirable state of nature.

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